

# Why occupy *République*? Redefining French citizenship from a Parisian square

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the recent occupation of the *place de la République* of Paris by the *Nuit Debout* movement, working with the assumption that it casts light on the shortcomings of French republican citizenship. Starting with the premise that space matters, it examines the major redevelopment project that the square underwent between 2008 and 2013, reflecting on the possible relation with the gentrification of the Eastern neighbourhoods of Paris. The paper then draws on what is known of the participants in the *Nuit Debout* movement to question its attempts, but ultimate failure, to fully include figures that were alien to the archetype of the French citizen, women, and people of colour. Despite efforts made to overcome the centralized nature of the movement and to reach out to the concerns of working-class peripheral neighbourhoods, the highly symbolic and central space of the *place de la République* spatially embodied the exclusionary nature, and violence, of the French public sphere.

**Keywords:** occupation; public space; renewal; exclusion; Paris

**Resum.** *Per què ocupar la République? Redefinir la ciutadania francesa des d'una plaça parisenca*

En aquest article s'analitza l'ocupació recent de la *Place de la République* de París pel moviment *Nuit Debout*, ja que pensem que fa llum sobre les deficiències de la ciutadania republicana francesa. Partint de la premissa que l'espai importa, s'examina l'important projecte de remodelació que es va portar a terme a la plaça entre 2008 i 2013, en relació amb la gentrificació dels barris de l'est de París. El treball analitza el perfil dels participants en el moviment *Nuit Debout* per qüestionar els seus intents —que finalment van fracassar— d'incloure plenament les persones alienes a l'arquetip del ciutadà francès: les dones i les persones racialitzades. Malgrat els esforços fets per superar la naturalesa centralitzada del moviment i englobar, així mateix, els problemes dels barris perifèrics obrers, l'espai altament simbòlic i central de la *Place de la République* encarnava espacialment la naturalesa exclouent —i la violència— de l'espai públic francès.

**Paraules clau:** ocupació; espai públic; renovació; exclusió; París

**Resumen.** *¿Por qué ocupar la République? Redefinir la ciudadanía francesa desde una plaza parisina*

En este artículo se analiza la reciente ocupación de la *Place de la République* en París por el movimiento *Nuit Debout*, ya que pensamos que arroja luz sobre las deficiencias de la ciudadanía republicana francesa. Partiendo de la premisa de que el espacio importa, se examina el importante proyecto de remodelación que se llevó a cabo en la plaza entre 2008 y 2013, en relación con la gentrificación de los barrios del este de París. El trabajo analiza el perfil de los participantes en el movimiento *Nuit Debout* para cuestionar sus intentos —que finalmente fracasaron— de incluir plenamente a las personas ajenas al arquetipo del ciudadano francés: las mujeres y las personas racializadas. A pesar de los esfuerzos realizados para superar la naturaleza centralizada del movimiento y englobar asimismo los problemas de los barrios periféricos obreros, el espacio altamente simbólico y central de la *Place de la République* encarnaba espacialmente la naturaleza excluyente —y la violencia— del espacio público francés.

**Palabras clave:** ocupación; espacio público; renovación; exclusión; París

**Résumé.** *Pourquoi occuper République ? Redéfinir une citoyenneté française depuis une place parisienne*

Cet article propose une réflexion sur l'occupation récente de la place de la République, à Paris, par le mouvement *Nuit Debout*, en partant de l'idée qu'elle éclaire certaines limites de la citoyenneté républicaine française. Parce que l'espace joue un rôle significatif, le réaménagement complet de la place entre 2008 et 2013 est présenté, en lien avec la gentrification de l'Est parisien. A partir de ce qui est connu de la participation à *Nuit Debout* (*République*), l'article questionne aussi les tentatives avortées pour inclure pleinement des figures non conformes à celles du citoyen-type, les femmes et personnes racisées. Malgré les efforts faits en direction des quartiers populaires, l'espace central hautement symbolique de la place de la République a incarné les exclusions et violences de l'espace public français plus généralement.

**Mots-clés:** occupation; espace public; réaménagement; exclusion; Paris

### Summary

The redevelopment of *République* (2008-2013): A flagship project for socialist mayors in Paris  
Who were the participants in the *Nuit Debout*?

Can struggles converge across the *périphérique*?

The violences of the *République*

Concluding remarks: A republic in danger

Acknowledgements

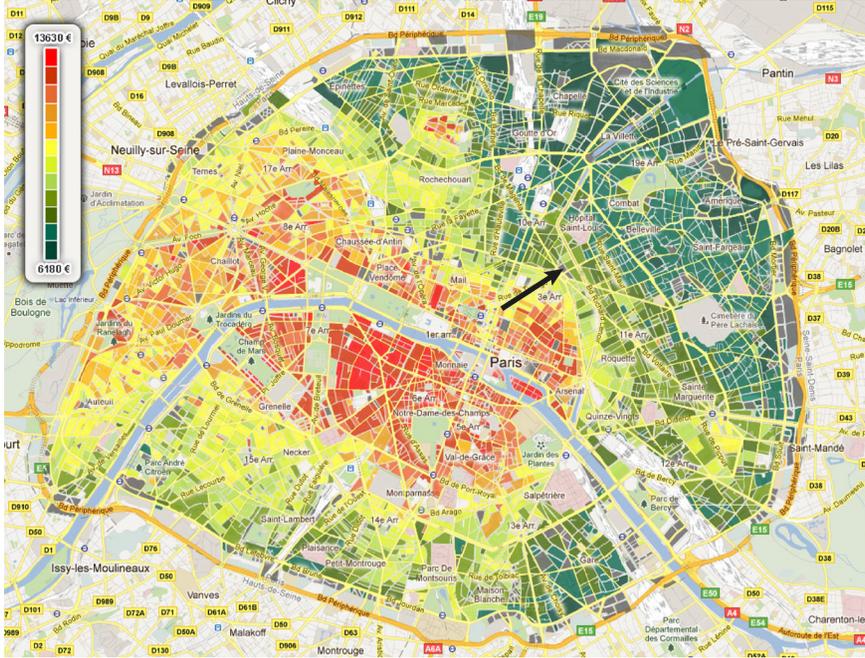
Bibliographical references

In 2011, at the height of the worldwide Occupy movement, while Spain was experiencing its own *Indignados* movement, a bunch of groups tried to occupy La Défense, Paris's brutalist 1960s business district, the product of De Gaulle's authoritarian drive to reorganize Paris and relieve its congested central areas. The occupation movement petered out, never having amounted to much. Among reasons for this relative failure, a presidential election was looming, which seemed to promise change and a break with the unbridled neoliberalism and nauseous right-wing ideology of the Sarkozy presidency. One could also argue that the location was badly chosen, on the Western outskirts of Paris, far from the heartland of left-wing movements and voters of eastern Paris, and as symbolizing a form of neoliberal oppression that is in competition, in France, with state oppression—when both do not work hand in hand.

A “socialist” government came to power in 2012 and has, by and large, brought anything but change, abandoning one campaign pledge after another, and reacting to terrorist attacks in France in a way that made it further indistinguishable from the extreme right. Dismay and disillusion have firmly set in, in particular among younger people who find this government's policies with respect to higher education, youth, work, and foreigners' rights a direct continuation of its predecessors'. Since 2012 it had seemed impossible to get more than a handful of die-hard activists out in the streets to take part in protests, because deals had been adroitly brokered between the socialists and workers or students' unions, forestalling mass mobilizations. On the last day of March 2016, however, following massive demonstrations protesting planned modifications to labour laws, people started occupying the *place de la République* as part of a movement styled *Nuit Debout* (“Up all night/ Standing Night” in English). The occupation lasted over a hundred nights, and took many of the features familiar to analyses of the 15-M or Occupy movements: horizontal, leaderless, supposedly inclusive, and based on physical presence, night after night, in a physical space, as crucial to constructive debate. As if to suggest it was a movement suspended in a time of its own, it started counting dates after March 31st as March 32nd (#32 Mars), etc., and actively communicated online through social media about occurrences, debates, and events on the square.

As geographers, we are used to the idea that “space matters”, and that WHERE events take place is often crucial. I want to try and apply this idea to a case study of “the where of *Nuit Debout*”, and what it can tell us about public space—how the connection actually works between the very concrete work of producing public space in contemporary European cities and the situation of crisis in which our political public sphere finds itself at the moment. As sociologists and specialists of communication technologies debate the effects of the Internet as a parallel “public space” and arena of debate (Tufekci, 2013), we geographers and urban studies academics need to wonder what remains linked to actual, physical urban space—what it means, and how it represents and signifies different things in people's experiences and mobilizations than screens and online participation.

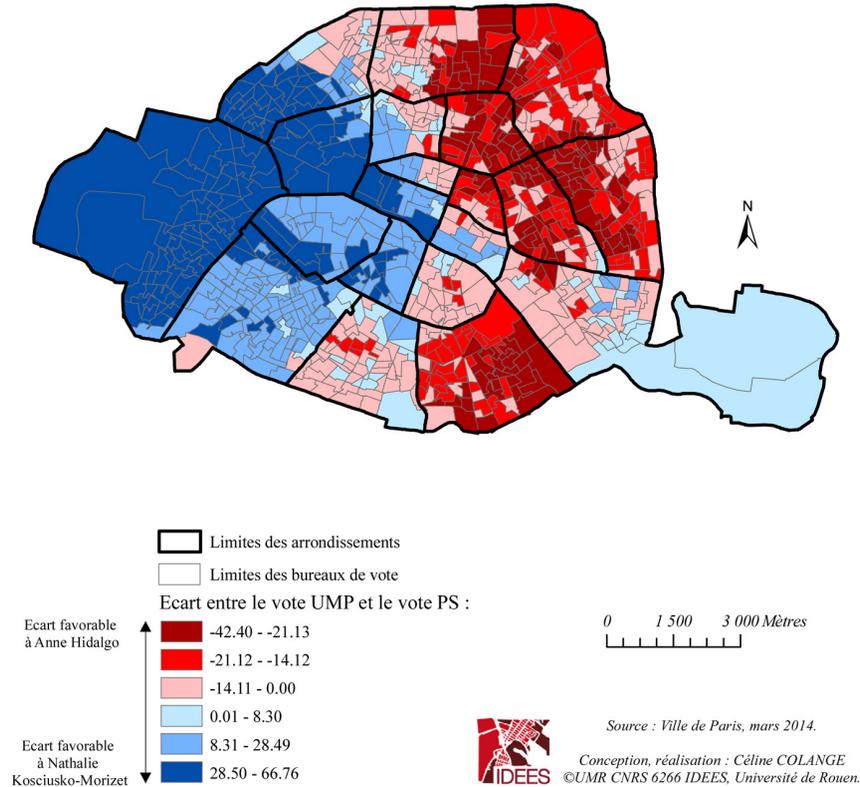
Figure 1. Map of housing prices in Paris from a grouping of estate agents. The location of *République* is indicated with an arrow on a crucial limit between the gentrified central *arrondissements* and more traditionally working-class *arrondissements*.



Source: <<http://www.plandeparis.info/immobilier/carte-prix-immobilier-paris.html>>.

I concentrate on the French, Parisian situation more specifically because I think despite the globalization movement, specific national contexts still play a major part in determining how social mobilizations play out in space. I also want to point to all the different slippages between *République* and Republic which exist in discourse and practices—between the actual physical space of the *place de la République* and the definition of France as a Republic (and how this definition has been increasingly captured by right-wing movements and reasserted as exclusionary). The current emphasis on participation in planning projects is part and parcel of what some analysts have suggested is a “participatory” democracy gradually replacing “representative” democracy—and beyond the consultation process now compulsory in new planning projects, one could argue that a movement such as *Nuit Debout* embodies this greater “participation” and more collaborative, flexible, and open ways of producing space and conducting politics. A key issue however is ‘who participates?’, whose opinions and preferences are courted in the consultation process, and who actually takes to public space to express opinions, concerns, and preferences.

Figure 2. Map of electoral trends in Paris during the 2014 municipal elections. *République* is firmly in the eastern heartland of left-wing voters who were instrumental in electing Anne Hidalgo. The red areas are also those from which the majority of participants in *Nuit Debout* were drawn.



Source: Céline Colange, Université de Rouen. Source: <<http://www.plandeparis.info/immobilier/carte-prix-immobilier-paris.html>>.

The first section of this paper therefore looks at the redevelopment of the *place de la République* which took place between 2008 and 2013, taking into account the aims of the project and the ways in which the square was altered—but also the meanings of the square, all of which were neither planned in or planned out by its renewal (figures 1 and 2). The second section takes a closer look at what is known of the participation in the *Nuit Debout* in order to determine to what sort of public, and to what sort of users, *République* has made itself hospitable. In further sections, I will argue that *Nuit Debout's* failure at overcoming traditional French Republican centralization and violence against minorities actually says as much about the constructions of the French Republic as it does about the public spaces being reinvented in gentrifying Paris.

### The redevelopment of *République* (2008-2013): A flagship project for socialist mayors in Paris

An unprecedented amount of money was invested in this redevelopment project (30 million euros) and it is to remain a one-off: while the municipality aims to redevelop seven further large squares in Paris (Fleury and Wuest, 2016), the total budget for all these projects is the same as was spent on *République*. The municipality of Paris stated in 2008 that the redevelopment (*réaménagement*) had three objectives, the first of which was explicitly to ‘reassert the Republican symbol and revalue historical heritage’. This points to a conflation of the urban public space of Paris, on the one hand, and the definition of the national, on the other: this is, on one level, a sign of French centralization and the confusion that long existed between Paris and the national government (and therefore the Republic). But it also questions the ways in which “citizenship” is conceptualized and experienced. Where Spanish has a single word, *ciudadanía*, to signify the belonging to the country and to the city, both English and French have words that separate the fact that one is a national from the status as inhabitant of the city. This separation is most problematic in Paris, which is in many ways an always-already postpolitical city: it had no elected mayor for most of the 20th century, since its revolutionary people were feared by central power. When the election of the mayor was instituted in the 1970s, the municipality retained a specific status and was run by a sprawling administration with a status similar to that of central government, and with a professional culture at odds with that of all other local authorities in France. Though not the main topic of this paper, the failings of local democracy in Paris are an important backdrop of what occurred in the city (Humain-Lamoure, 2010; Amadiou and Framont, 2015).

The other two stated objectives of the renewal of *République* were to ‘integrate new mobilities’ and share public space more fairly and to ‘reinforce conviviality and design a place for gatherings’. There was much talk of the “reconquering” of public space, of pedestrians “reclaiming” their rights, and an unprecedented degree of discussion about who owns public space, and for whom it is being designed (Delarc, 2016). Three scenarios were considered: the first emphasized “everyday République” and focused on the needs of inhabitants of the three *arrondissements* around the square (the 3rd, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup>) with the idea of creating a café space for entertainment and an information office. The second scenario emphasized “Paris beyond the walls” and the scale of the metropolis, also with a *café* and a showcase of Paris’s major museums. The third scenario, and the one which was finally given priority, was “Paris-World” with a *café* “open to the world”. This points to a difficulty in defining to whom public space, in large, globalized cities such as Paris, ultimately belongs, whose needs and expectations should be granted priority, and at what scale such a space can be expected to operate: local residents, inhabitants of the city at large, and visitors from all over the world. One thing was clear, however: consumption, and *café* culture, were non-negotiable. The municipality

also emphasized that the process was to be conducted collaboratively with local inhabitants, users, business owners, and people of the metropolis more generally: ‘The municipality of Paris wanted this project to be exemplary, and the most diverse forms of consultation were used, beyond local councils, with specialized groups from outside the municipality being hired to handle them: “joint diagnostics”, “commented walks”, working blueprints made available online... (Fleury and Wuest, 2016).

A choice was made to emphasize leisure and fun, even in the public consultation phase conducted by BazarUrbain and Ville Ouverte. The planning project was predicated on the need to leave the space as open as possible to allow for a multiplicity of uses, and for reversibility (either in the short or the long term). The idea was also to make the space hospitable and comfortable to stay in: much was made of the fact that the benches were wide enough not just to sit, but also for homeless people to lie and rest on (though, in fact, homeless people who had been usual users of the small green patches on the old square were displaced). According to the Trevelo et Viger-Kohler agency which carried out the redevelopment:

“Soft mobility” [*les circulations douces*] now has 70% of the surface of the square (as opposed to 40% before) with a large pedestrian esplanade of over 2 hectares. The redevelopment plan relies on a new sharing out of public space which favours “soft mobility”, public transportation and new uses, for residents as well as tourists or metropolitans. This new sharing is to allow this 36,000 square meter square to return to its convivial nature and answer its calling as a gathering place, to become the example of the people’s square [*la place populaire*] of the 21st century.<sup>1</sup>

The inauguration ceremony took place in June 2013 and was conducted by Bertrand Delanoë, then Mayor of Paris, along with Anne Hidalgo who was preparing her bid to succeed him (she became mayor in March 2014). It remains questionable to what extent what they inaugurated was in fact the “people’s square”. The *place de la République* had changed in ways that make it symbolic of the gentrification of eastern Paris (Figure 3): a slightly grotty square, overrun by cars and overlooked by a huge Tati store at the beginning of this century, had been deliberately cleaned up and prettified to become a “bobo”<sup>2</sup> haunt, freed to a large extent from car traffic in order to become the hipster playground the socialist municipality envisioned it as—a recognition of the fact that Paris, a traditional stronghold of the right for most of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, switched to the left in 2001 even as the process of eviction

1. <<http://projets-architecte-urbanisme.fr/place-republique-paris-agence-tvk/>>.

2. The term “bobo”, for bourgeois bohème (bourgeois Bohemian), coined by the US conservative journalist David Brooks in 2000, has become extremely popular in France to designate (and denigrate) the middle classes combining relatively high income with progressive values and multicultural openness (a section of the electorate that has been crucial both to the gentrification of eastern Paris and to the city’s shift to a socialist majority).

Figure 3. The renovated *Place de la République* seen from above: a “*grande place populaire*” (great square for the people) for the 21st century?



Source: <<http://www.tvk.fr/p/fr/projets-2>>.

of the working-class was reaching its heights (Clerval, 2013). The “people” the Parisian socialists had in mind were their electorate, and all analyses point to the fact this electorate is far more middle class, culturally if not economically, than it is working class. In a way, you could argue that *République* was actually designed for what *Nuit Debout* did (and also, in a way, designed for the very people who featured prominently in *Nuit Debout*).

However, the redevelopment did not override other, earlier callings and meanings of *République*: it had long been a traditional starting point for demonstrations in the French capital. In 2002, when the socialist candidate was knocked out of the presidential contest in the first round, leaving voters with a choice between the candidates of the right and the extreme-right Front National, Parisians spontaneously gathered there to share sadness, revolt and shout slogans through the night. The square holds an enduring meaning for left-leaning Parisians, standing as it does on the threshold of central Paris and more peripheral and traditionally working-class areas of the city.

In 2015, following the tragic attacks on the Bataclan, the Stade de France and Paris *cafés* and restaurants, people again spontaneously made *République* a shrine to the victims, depositing flowers, candles, and tributes at the foot of the statue.<sup>3</sup>

3. In August 2016, the municipality cleared away the shrine and moved many of the memorials to the Archives de Paris. The shrine and local memorializing were documented by sociologist Sarah Gensburger on the website <<https://quartierdubataclan.wordpress.com/>>.

Commenting on Occupy Wall Street in September 2016, *New Statesman* columnist Laurie Penny wrote: ‘The space was critical, and was, fundamentally, its own demand... The whole place was charged with symbolism — even down to the time and location, exactly ten years and a few hundred feet from Ground Zero, the raw wound on the narrative of American self-confidence’ (Penny, 2016).

*République* was the site of a much more recent, and still bleeding and festering, wound on French republicanism: the November 2015 terrorist attacks took place at nearby *cafés* and the Bataclan, a few hundred metres away. As many commentators pointed out,<sup>4</sup> it was all but accidental that areas close to *République* were targeted by the terrorist attacks: as “grey zones” where Muslims and non-Muslims mingle, as a breeding ground for the next generation of the leftist intellectual and artistic elite, it is the place where France will have to decide whether progressive engagements can come to terms with religious and racial difference at last.

### Who were the participants in the *Nuit Debout*?

There was a joke, during the months of intense occupation of *République* in the Spring of 2016, that one out of two people present at *Nuit Debout* was a researcher doing fieldwork on social movements—and indeed, *République* is not only central for hipsters, but also for academics and graduate students, many of whom have been among the gentrifiers of the area (Figure 4). The occupation movement was taking place virtually on their doorstep, and therefore became the object of much scholarly scrutiny.

Among those who published some results rapidly, a collective of sociologists (S. Baciocchi, A. Bidet, P. Blavier, M. Boutet, L. Champenois, C. Gayet-Viaud, E. Le Méner) made available the preliminary results of a survey conducted from April 8th to May 13th 2016, carried out by 30 researchers and with 600 respondents.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, they found that most participants who lived in Paris *intra muros* came from the Northern and Eastern *arrondissements* which consistently voted for left-wing parties in recent elections. They also found that only 37% of participants living in the Ile-de-France region came from the urban area of Paris outside the walls, so from the administrative *banlieue* departments<sup>6</sup> (with one person in ten coming from other regions, or abroad). A large majority therefore came from central Paris, mostly right-bank neighbourhoods, and a large majority also were higher education graduates (61%).

In an interview with Faiza Zerouala, François Ruffin, a filmmaker whose documentary *Merci Patron* was one of the frequently referenced inspirations of the movement, stated:

4. See, for instance, <<http://fusion.net/story/233036/paris-attack-young-progressive-core/>>.

5. <<https://nuitdebout.fr/blog/2016/05/20/qui-vient-a-nuit-debout-des-sociologues-repondent/>>.

6. These comprise nearly 9 million people, as opposed to 2.2 million in Paris *intra muros*.

**Figure 4.** République reinvented as hipster playground. In the background, the shrine to the victims of the 2015 terrorist attacks, at the foot of the statue.



Source: <<http://republique.tvk.fr>>.

What is striking is the extent to which people occupying the *place de la République* and other squares in other large cities of France don't represent everyone. They belong more or less to the same class as me, and I do not mean it in any way negatively: the small intellectual bourgeoisie, in various degrees of precariousness.

Ruffin further expressed his concern about the relatively small base of the movement, and its restricted catchment area:

We shouldn't stop at that. The movement has to extend beyond urban centres and develop on the outskirts, in the *banlieues*, in rural and industrial areas, or it will reach its limits very quickly. It is necessary to reach out to the *milieux populaires* [working-class people]. (Zerouala, 2016)

In many ways, the idea of a movement developing from centre to peripheries is typical of French ways of envisioning the spread of ideas, and significant of the very centralized ways in which political movements are understood. Others were more reluctant to accept this way of thinking: an activist from the *banlieue* city of Créteil, David Cousy, created an alternative “Banlieues Debout” movement to advertise on Twitter and Facebook initiatives and gatherings in other parts of the Paris urban area, and criticized the “Jaco-

bin” scheme implicit in *République* being associated with *Nuit Debout*: ‘It’s as though they were sending emissaries to instruct the *quartiers* what to do. It’s neocolonial. Paris wouldn’t accept instructions from Dijon. It’s the same for the *banlieue*. We have to leave behind this *Jacobin* scheme’<sup>7</sup> (Zerouala, 2016).

Beyond the critique of usual French failings (centralization, Parisianism, etc.), arguments were made to point out that the *banlieues* in fact carried greater experience and legitimate grievances than the relatively privileged middle-class people gathering at *the place de la République*: for instance, Louise, a participant in the *St-Denis Debout* meetings, emphasized that ‘the state violence inherent in the new labour law has always been felt in this discriminated territory’ (Zerouala, 2016). Saint-Denis is one of the more notorious *banlieues* just north of Paris, and was also a site of some of the attacks of November 13th 2015 (near the Stade de France). It is also where some of the attackers took refuge before being killed in an extremely violent police operation which left many local residents very shocked.

However, the issue was not just one of location, and several anti-racist activists pointed out that those present on the *place de la République* were overwhelmingly White (an issue not addressed in the survey, and generally taboo in French research and statistics<sup>8</sup>). Sihame Assbague, a prominent anti-racist advocate, stated:

When they call for people from the *quartiers populaires* [working-class neighbourhoods] it’s a euphemism. The real translation is “non-White people”. This is something left-wing movements have been calling for for years. But they never question the structural reasons that explain that non-Whites and people from the *quartiers* are absent from this struggle. (Zerouala, 2016)

Discussing this issue, Gregory Smithsimon admits that ‘the challenge of inclusion is one that *La Nuit Debout* did not initially meet’ (Smithsimon, 2016) but goes on to argue that after a month and a half (i.e., around mid-April), more groups representing anti-racist, pro-Palestinian and working-class concerns were becoming visible on the *place de la République* and managing to put some of their concerns on the agenda (though they never became central). Importantly, he argues that ‘The issues that triggered the massive protest—threats to previously secure employment, betrayal by an elite professional class, a once reliably certain future rendered precarious—are those of a class

7. While *Jacobinisme* originally referred to some revolutionaries’ concern to preserve the Revolution by preventing the provinces assumed to be conservative and anti-revolutionary from gaining any power, it has gradually taken on further meanings to do with centralized bureaucracy and technocracy, which is quite apt in the Parisian context, if not necessarily regarding *Nuit Debout* itself (though voices were heard criticizing the hold of a small minority of tech-savvy “communicators” over the movement’s strategy and self-presentation online).
8. There is no racial or ethnic self-identification question in French censuses therefore no reliable data on the non-White population in France, and demographers are obliged to use “place of birth of parents” as an unsatisfactory proxy (Simon, 2008).

that once believed they were at the heart of the nation' (Smithsimon, 2016): this goes a long way to explain why the calls for the *convergence des luttes* (convergence of struggles), and solidarity from working-class *banlieues* for the *République* gatherings, never really succeeded.

### Can struggles converge across the *périphérique*?

As I.M. Young pointed out, 'The separation perhaps most far reaching in its effect on social justice is the legal separation of municipalities themselves... The legal and social separation of city and suburbs, moreover, contributes to social injustice' (Young, 1990: 247). The spatial injustice she was describing in US cities, however, is reversed when it comes to Paris, with the city concentrating wealth, resources, services, and many wealthy inhabitants, and the *banlieues* having over the centuries had to host whatever industry or population the core wanted to rid itself of. Paris and its *banlieues* are separated by a physical and symbolic barrier, the *périphérique* (ring-road, which was built in the 1960s on the area where the walls of Paris stood until the 1920s). Furthermore, it has increasingly been seen as a "colour line" dividing "White Paris" from the more ethnically mixed *banlieues* (Truong, 2012): *les quartiers*, neighbourhoods targeted by French urban policy, have increasingly been constructed by public policy and official discourse as ethnically different (Tissot, 2007).

The divide also operates in political debates and mobilizations: "social" and "anti-colonial" struggles remain separate, as if they were in different spheres, making it uniquely difficult to link 'points of mobilization positioned differentially *vis-à-vis* dynamics of socio-spatial peripheralization' (Goonewardena et al., 2008: 289). This is why calls for the *convergence des luttes* are regular occurrences in social movements, but tend to remain unheeded to a large extent. A case in point is the response of the *Parti des Indigènes de la République* (PIR), a party starkly critical of France's denial of its colonial past and racist present (see Kipfer, 2011, for an in-depth presentation of the PIR), to *Nuit Debout*:

You can't decree the *convergence des luttes*. If inhabitants of deprived neighbourhoods don't feel "concerned" by *Nuits Debout*, it's not that they are unaware of their own interests, it's not just because they refuse to show solidarity with people who never supported them when they mobilized, as was the case in the October 2005 revolts. It's primarily because *Nuit Debout*, in its terms and current modes of action, does not concern them.<sup>9</sup>

The *banlieues* revolts in October 2005, following the death of two boys in Clichy-sous-Bois, remain a major reference for decolonial and anti-racist movements (Hancock, 2016), and the fact that no solidarity was shown by middle-class activists at the time is a fact acknowledged even by organizations

9. <<http://indigenes-republique.fr/nuit-blanche-debout-comment-sortir-de-lentre-soi/>>.

more inclined to work towards convergence. This is, for instance, the introductory paragraph of a call signed by 14 individuals and 6 collectives to organize common actions between *Nuit Debout* and the quarters:

In October 2005, after the death of Zyed and Bouna, a legitimate revolt started in Clichy-sous-Bois and spread to the whole country. This people's revolt remained isolated, despised by large sections of social movements. The fault line still divides us, but the struggles of the *quartiers populaires* are an integral part of the workers' social movement.<sup>10</sup>

These collectives organized a march on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2016 (96 Mars in the *Nuit Debout* calendar), departing from *République* to meet with groups in *quartiers populaires*, one in the 20<sup>ème</sup> *arrondissement* (les Amandiers, where the family of a victim of police killing was demonstrating to have an investigation opened), and two in the 9-3, the *banlieue département* directly north of Paris and which concentrates many of the poorest of the urban area (in Les Lilas they were to bring support to workers fighting unfair dismissal, in Romainville, to support residents fighting gentrification).

Almamy Kanoutè (a signatory of the call) is one of the activists who worked most to achieve convergence: in an interview with the magazine *Les Inrocks*, which presents him as 'the man who wants to export *Nuit Debout* to the *banlieue*', he insisted it was important 'not just to stay in *République*, the movement has to be mobile, Parisians have to go to the *banlieues* and the *banlieusards* (inhabitants of the *banlieues*) come to Paris'.<sup>11</sup> Kanoutè's speech at the *Nuit Debout* general assembly on March 40 (April 9<sup>th</sup>) was welcomed enthusiastically by the crowd, with one of his phrases reported on Twitter by David Doucet (YEAR), a journalist with *les Inrocks*: 'If we manage the junction between Parisians and *banlieusards*, the system will be scared'. One reply on Twitter read 'when scared by *banlieue* Arabs and Blacks, guess what? they open fire'.

### The violences of the *République*

I want to argue that it is no coincidence if the above retort was written by a transgender activist, and that it foregrounds police violence as the standard response to mobilizations by minorities. Issues of violence ran through the *Nuit Debout* narrative; but while police violence was an open, and widely discussed issue, there was also an underlying current of violence towards minorities, even on the part of the committees coordinating the gatherings and debates.

Unsurprisingly for feminist geographers well versed in the challenges faced by women and gender minorities in public space, *Nuit Debout*, as an organiza-

10. <<https://www.convergence-des-luttes.org/communiqués-de-presse/marche-de-convergences-des-luttes-nuit-debout-quartiers-populaires/>> (last accessed October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016)..

11. <<http://www.lesinrocks.com/2016/04/19/actualite/almamy-kanoute-lhomme-veut-exporter-nuit-debout-banlieue-11820680/>>.

tion and as a space on the *place de la République*, was all but safe, and exerted several forms of violence, from the symbolic (women or gender minorities being allowed very little speaking time in the general assemblies, even as their forms of employment were the most likely to be impacted by the changes to labour law) to the sexual. A rape occurred one night, and the victim was told by the committee in charge of *Accueil et sérénité* (Welcoming and serenity) to remain silent about it and not lodge an official complaint for the sake of preserving the reputation of the place and the movement. An impassioned critique was put online by the *Féministes Debout* reading: ‘Sexual assaults, anti-feminist discourse, an overwhelming majority of men speaking, harassment, unwanted touching, rape... women have endured here what they endure everywhere else’.<sup>12</sup> As a consequence of this rampant sexist violence, people attending the *Nuit Debout* gatherings, especially at night, were all but representative of a Parisian population with a significant female majority: according to the survey conducted in April and May, two-thirds of those present were men. Though there was a “feminism commission”, it struggled to be acknowledged as structural rather than anecdotal.<sup>13</sup> The leading figures of the movement were older White males such as Ruffin or Lordon, quite dismissive of the importance of feminist struggles, and public proclamations of conscious feminist inclusiveness seem to have remained as virtual as does the motto of the French Republic (Figure 5).

When the feminism commission tried to carve out a women and gender-minority only space and time on the square, it was met with violent and brutal objections: in the words of a fifty-year old man, reported in *Le Monde*: ‘I do not, on a public square, accept to be dispossessed of the debate and to be taken as target! If you adopt an exclusionary and separatist logic, it is no longer *Nuit Debout* but *Mort* (death) *debout*!’.<sup>14</sup> This remark is typical of French universalistic logic and failure to see the real exclusionary consequences of its theoretically colour-blind and gender-blind stance, which blames minority groups that try to self-organize, and protect themselves from majority oppression in so doing, for their own oppression.

Several critical feminist groups including Muslim and racialized members expressed their sense of not being made welcome at the nightly gatherings on the square, with one activist being explicitly told she was ‘intellectually unfit’ to participate. Fania Noël, an anti-racist activist, reported her experience at the *Nuit Debout* as an ‘ethnology of Whiteness’. She and others professed themselves shocked that participants in the *Nuit Debout* placated policemen with kisses, feeling that this proved their relation with police forces to be radically different from that of racialized groups.

12. <<https://feministesdebout.wordpress.com/2016/05/05/nuit-debout-vers-un-monde-degalite/>>.

13. <<http://www.slate.fr/story/117733/nuitdebout-agressions-sexuelles-sexisme>>.

14. <[http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/04/21/a-la-nuit-debout-les-reunions-non-mixtes-des-feministes-font-debat\\_4905848\\_3224.html#pD2ik8dadiye2Prz.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2016/04/21/a-la-nuit-debout-les-reunions-non-mixtes-des-feministes-font-debat_4905848_3224.html#pD2ik8dadiye2Prz.99)>.

Figure 5. An image of a *Nuit Debout* gathering on the *place de la République* with an older woman and a non-White woman wearing a veil looking on from the margins.



Source: <<http://republique.tvk.fr>>.

For many of the middle-class young people on the square, *Nuit Debout* was their first experience of arbitrary police violence: while the occupation of the square was by and large tolerated, it was also subjected to periodical destruction and more or less violent “clearing” operations. Peaceful demonstrators being severely wounded were much more widely reported by alternative media, if not necessarily mainstream ones, because the ones being hurt were White middle-class young people, rather than *banlieue* youths routinely subjected to similar treatment at the hands of the police. The Parti des Indigènes de la République commented tersely:

the White are paying the price for their past indifference to a state of emergency that did not directly affect them. Reinforced by its attacks on deprived neighbourhoods (*quartiers populaires*), the state became unashamedly radicalized and authoritarian, gained pace, and is now turning on the middle class. This very middle class is the one calling on the *quartiers populaires* to show solidarity!<sup>15</sup>

Laurie Penny argues that policing was instrumental in ending the Occupy Wall Street movement: ‘I will not tolerate the suggestion that Occupy simply

15. <<http://indigenes-republique.fr/nuit-blanche-debout-comment-sortir-de-lentre-soi/>>.

“fizzled out”, that it sputtered and extinguished because dirty hippies didn’t know what they were doing”, she writes. ‘This is an arrant lie. It was the police’ (Penny, 2016). We are probably too close to *Nuit debout*, which continues to meet at weekends on the *place de la République*, much more sporadically and with less attendance, to know definitely what led to its decline. Some argue that the fact the labour law was passed without parliamentary debate, during the summer, cast a fatal blow to the movement. I would argue, however, that the communicators of the movement had done much to sabotage themselves by silencing minorities and treating claims emerging from the *banlieues* as secondary to their mobilization. Maybe one of the worst moves on the part of those in charge of social media communication was to suggest that those sympathizing with *Nuit debout* send in their photographs of their beach vacations with the hashtag #VacancesDebout:<sup>16</sup> in a country where 4 out of 5 members of the middle classes, but fewer than half of the working class, can actually afford a holiday, this was a clear statement of the movement not being of, by, or for the most deprived.

The violence exerted on the *place de la République* was therefore symbolic violence as much as police violence, sexual and class violence prioritizing the concerns and aims of White middle-class citizens over those of minorities—illustrating the ways in which even a mobilization ostentatiously working to build a better world was likely to reproduce exclusionary definitions of citizenship, and right to participate in the public sphere. The experience of police violence that could have opened the eyes of middle-class activists to a situation that *banlieue* and anti-racist activists have been denouncing for decades failed to spur an actual convergence, and the causes that the movement chooses to foreground remain inscribed in middle-class hierarchies.

### Concluding remarks: A republic in danger

France has been living in a state of emergency (allowing for multiple forms of arbitrary police violence against any form of mobilization and the restriction of personal liberties) for over a year and faces the prospect of presidential elections in the spring of 2017 under this stark regime of greatly reduced public liberties. In many ways, republicanism contributes to oppression and repression in France as much as, if not more than, neoliberalism—which is why *République* warrants mobilization and reclaiming more than *La Défense*. *Nuit Debout*, with nightly gatherings on many squares throughout France, still saw *République* as its epicentre; a crucible of its credibility was its ability to federate movements such as *Banlieues Debout* and overcome its Parisian snobbery. Interestingly, the *Nuit Debout* twitter account that mostly recorded events on the *République* square has in recent weeks mostly re-tweeted announcements of events taking place in the provinces (many to do with refugee and migrant issues, protesting (illegal) local decisions by mayors not to host asylum seekers

16. <<https://gazettedebout.fr/2016/08/30/vacances-debout-4-nuit-debout-bronze-a-plage/>>.

in their municipalities or right-wing movements against such arrivals). This echoes what Z. Tufekci (2013) depicted after the Gezi mobilization in Istanbul: many local committees organizing local events beyond the focal point that had attracted media attention.

Though the original *Nuit Debout* participants still meet on the square at weekends as of November 2016, most reports agree that the movement has lost steam and exhausted itself. The labour law that was the trigger for the original demonstrations was passed during the summer, through a special legislative procedure that allows for no debate and forces all members of a majority to vote the proposed law or be in defiance of the government. In October, policemen organized unauthorized demonstrations on the *place de la République* (and elsewhere in Paris), ostensibly to protest their poor working conditions under the state of emergency (but it has emerged that some of the leaders of the protest were in fact activists of the extreme-right Front National party rather than active policemen). The police started holding their own protests in reaction to increased pressures and extremely difficult working conditions. However, they also started staging unauthorized nighttime demonstrations on October 17th, i.e. on the anniversary of the massacre of Algerians (demanding independence) which took place in Paris in 1961. The aftermath of the January and November terrorist attacks has been an increase in the stigmatization of Muslims in public discourse and media, and ever-growing violence against people rightly or wrongly associated with this faith.

*Nuit Debout's* affiliation with the claims of primarily White middle-class workers, over claims staked from the *quartiers populaires*, was again exemplified in some of the most recent events staged on the *place de la République* and supported by the *Nuit Debout*: *Nuit Debout* strongly echoed and supported a “feminist” mobilization to stop work on November 7th at 4.36 pm in order to protest salary inequality between women and men, which was rightly criticized as bourgeois, a-political, and exclusive of the most precarious, working-class, racialized female workers unlikely to be able to walk out in answer to that call.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, a mobilization emerging from the *banlieues* and protesting the death at the hands of the police of Adama Traoré, a young man who was brutally arrested in Beaumont-sur-Oise in July 2016, took place on Saturday 5th November: originating from Châtelet and ending on the *place de la République*, the demonstration was barely advertised on the *Nuit Debout* accounts, and clearly not embraced with as much enthusiasm.

Since its complete renewal, the *place de la République* has changed beyond recognition, but has also remained very much the same. It remains symbolic of all the ways in which the French Republic has been redefining itself in recent decades as elite rather than inclusive, staunchly White even as the population of Paris, and France, is more diverse than ever—and belying its motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* at every turn and with every single declaration by members

17. See commentary by Marie-Anne Paveau on her blog <<https://penseedudiscours.hypotheses.org/13325>>.

of so-called “socialist” governments. It is therefore no coincidence if *République* was the focal point for the *Nuit Debout* mobilization. It is, in fact, as suggested in the early stages of its renewal, the definition of Republicanism that is at stake, along with a deep crisis in the definition of what being left-wing means in France at the moment. *République* has been in some ways a battleground on which revolutionary principles are being used in profoundly exclusionary ways, confiscated by a privileged group of White people who claim to be colour-blind but are in fact closing their eyes on the deeply embedded forms of racism and the violent discrimination of minorities in the French context.

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